

126 Sewall Street
Augusta, Maine 04330-6822
TTY/Voice: (207) 626-7058
www.mainequaljustice.org



Kathy Kilrain del Rio
Advocacy & Programs Director
(207) 626-7058, ext. 210
kathy@mejp.org

MEJ Testimony in Support of LD 2121, *An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions*
February 8, 2024

Good morning, Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the State and Local Government Committee. My name is Kathy Kilrain del Rio, I use she/her pronouns, and I'm the Advocacy and Programs Director for Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. We are testifying today in support of LD 2121.

A big part of the work MEJ does is assist Mainers with low incomes in accessing needed supports and programs that are managed by state agencies. These programs help people across our state put food on their tables, maintain a safe place to live, access education and training so they can increase their financial security, navigate the loss of employment, access necessary health care, and so much more. To help people with meeting their basic needs, MEJ works closely with multiple state agencies and greatly appreciates the variety of vital work done by state workers.

Strong state government is necessary for our safety net programs to run smoothly and meet the needs of low-income Mainers. And state workers are the backbone of our state agencies. When someone is struggling to feed their family, access Unemployment Insurance, access health care to treat serious medical issues, or facing other financial challenges that threaten their wellbeing or the wellbeing of their children, they need prompt responses from state agencies. Long wait-times and stretched workers with huge workloads weaken the ability of older Mainers, families, those with disabilities, and many others in need to access essential services. For example, it is not uncommon for people trying to call the Office of Family Independence at the Department of Health and Human Services to wait for many hours on hold to speak with an eligibility worker. We have heard multiple times from state agencies that they cannot implement new laws on time due to staffing constraints. Almost every Mainer is affected by these types of challenges that exist across the whole of state government even if they don't know it.

Chronic problems with recruiting and maintaining staff for these important positions prevent Maine people from getting the services they need when they need them. That's why LD 2121 is so important. State positions must be competitive to attract and keep a strong workforce. We will continue to see far too many vacancies and employee turnover until we close the pay gap.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts with you today. We urge you to pass LD 2121 and I'm happy to answer any questions.